

UNIVERSALS OF CULTURE: A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING UNITY AND UNIQUENESS

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Why do we need Global Education?

We live in one world. What we do affects others, and what others do affects us, as never before. To recognize that we are all members of a world community and that we all have responsibilities to each other is not romantic rhetoric, but modern economic and social reality (DfES, 2004, p. 5).

In identifying the skills and competencies needed for the 21st century, educators worldwide are recognizing the importance of infusing a global dimension in the curriculum. Including the global dimension in teaching means that links can be made between local and global issues. It also means that young people are given opportunities to critically examine their own values and attitudes: appreciate the similarities between peoples everywhere, and value diversity; and develop skills that will enable them to combat injustice, prejudice and discrimination. Such knowledge, skills, and understanding enable young people to make informed decisions about playing an active role in the global community (DfES, 2005, p. 2).

We live in times characterized by change and global connections. These changes reflect international trends: globalization of economics; increased connectivity through communication technologies; international dimension of issues and problems; and new immigration patterns (Stewart, 2007). Living in an era of global change requires schools to re-evaluate how they are preparing students to successfully adapt. “Appropriate and meaningful responses to demands for change require a new set of basic skills and competencies which are interdisciplinary and not restricted by cultural or time boundaries” (Lamy, 1987, p. 133).

In an increasingly global society, it is more important than ever that young adolescents are taught to understand, tolerate, accept, and even embrace cultural differences in others. The ability to shift perspective from self to others develops flexible thinking. Research suggests a relationship between mental flexibility and prejudice. Children low in

prejudice tend to be more open to the point of view of others and think critically (Farris & Cooper, 1997). Understanding and respecting the perspectives of others is an important goal of global education (Jones, Haenfler, Johnson & Klocke, 2001; Noddings, 2005; Stewart, 2007).

This article focuses on teaching for global understanding by using big ideas to link interdisciplinary concepts. One big idea, the Universals of Culture, offers middle level educators a framework for building unity while acknowledging diversity. Furthermore, the framework supports developmentally responsive teaching that is relevant, challenging, and integrative (NMSA, 2003).

Teaching with Big Ideas

Living in an age where the volume of information doubles every five years requires tools to guide students in making sense of this knowledge explosion. Concepts act as pattern shapers to find meaning in a plethora of information. Optimal brain functioning occurs when teaching organizes and presents information in a manner that assists in pattern detection (Caine & Caine, 1991; Jensen, 2000; Wolfe, 2001). By their very nature, concepts tie related ideas together around a larger whole (the big idea/concept) thus making sense of the world.

Big ideas are broad concepts or themes. These themes are universally experienced and thus act as the pattern shapers of life. They are intrinsic to all life experiences, and transcend time, space and culture. Simply put, big ideas serve as lenses for understanding any people at any point in time, including self. By using the same lens to examine self as well as others, it guides us toward recognizing connections. The individual connection is unique but the big idea provides a unifying framework for understanding the self in relation to others.

Big ideas are cross-disciplinary. The traditional fragmentation of content by disciplines assumes that students will recognize the links between the disciplines on their own. A conceptual approach purposefully and systematically guides students toward discovering these connections. It is the process of making connections that helps students better understand. Each recognized pattern or theme is like a thread in the tapestry of life. Weaving these threads together begins to reveal the design of life.

Universals of Culture

A big idea approach to studying cultures emphasizes looking at the universal needs and common bonds of humanity while simultaneously examining how these needs are uniquely addressed. For example, while all people need food for survival, the selection, preparation, and serving of food is culturally relative. Cultural preferences for food are influenced by the availability of natural resources as well as the introduction of new ideas and resources from other cultures. In order to promote understanding, a study of culture needs to start locally and extend outwards (Ikeda, 2005; Noddings, 2005). This enables students to meaningfully identify with the aspects of culture being studied and guides them in the process of comparing and contrasting.

The Universals of Culture serve as a “big idea” and provide a conceptual lens for recognizing the unity and uniqueness of each culture. All cultures share these components

but manifest them in different ways. The Universals of Culture include: material culture (food, shelter, clothing, tools, transportation, possessions); arts, play and recreation; social organization (kinship systems, families, societies); economic organization; language and nonverbal communication; social control; education (formal, informal); conflict and warfare; and world view (Cleaveland, Craven & Danfelter, 1979).

In contrast, other approaches to studying culture often involve the teacher selecting activities of interest to students. For example, a study of China might include reading a piece of Chinese literature, working with tangrams, creating Chinese papercuts, sampling food, map studies, and noting cultural treasures such as the Great Wall and the terra cotta warrior figures. Upon unit completion, students will know many new things about China but not necessarily how they are interconnected or how they relate to self.

Engaging students in activities related to another culture is a start. However, to really develop deep conceptual understanding of cultures, it is necessary to do more than participate in “fun” activities. Understanding the traditions of a culture like China is much more meaningful when compared to similar traditions, customs, and artifacts in one’s own culture as well as other contrasting cultures. It is often said that we understand our own language by studying a foreign language. The same can be said of culture. We understand our own culture by studying a foreign culture. The Universals of Culture provides a lens for comparing artifacts from different cultures.

We use one component of the Universals of Culture, folk art, to demonstrate how this framework guides students toward discovering the uniqueness of each culture while also finding the unity that binds cultures together. In the examples that follow, we use folk art from two cultural groups. We will explore traditional Chinese papercutting and compare it to quilting in the United States. While at first glance these appear to be unique examples of folk art, a closer examination reveals cultural parallels (unity).

A Teaching Framework

The framework below offers a tool for studying cultural artifacts. It can be used with any Universal of Culture and can be modified for different instructional purposes. It includes the following steps.

1. Lens - Select a Universal of Culture to use as a lens for cultural study and gather artifacts reflecting that universal.
2. Single artifact analysis - sample questions to guide the analysis
 - a. *Functionality/uses*: What is the artifact? What is it for? Which Universals of Culture are represented within the artifact?
 - b. *Artifact production/authenticity*: From which materials is it made? Is it made from natural resources? Is it handmade or machine made? If handmade, who made the artifact? Is it authentic?
 - c. *Cultural beliefs/world views*: Are there any cultural symbols included? Were ideas borrowed from other cultures? Is it traditional or a contemporary version? What cultural beliefs or world views are represented?
3. Generalizing from a sample of artifacts – sample questions to aid in forming generalizations
 - a. *Functionality/uses*: Do they all have similar uses?

- b. *Artifact production/authenticity*: Are they all made from similar materials? Are the colors similar? Does the artifact creation seem related to any social roles?
 - c. *Cultural beliefs/world views*: Do you see certain symbols represented several times? Do certain beliefs or values seem to be represented?
 - d. *Extensions*: Which additional artifacts might you need to see?
4. Cultural comparison
- a. *Contrast*: Repeat steps 1 and 2 with artifacts from a different culture
 - b. *Compare and Contrast*: How do the functions, creation, and beliefs reflected in the artifacts make each culture different? Similar? How does the selected Universal of Culture aid in finding such differences and similarities?

Chinese Folk Art: Papercuts

Chinese papercutting is a traditional folk art that dates back to the 6th century. Its origin relates to the invention of paper during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25A.D.-221A.D.). In the early days paper was very precious so papercutting was limited to female nobility. As access to paper grew, papercutting became popular amongst commoners. In rural areas, papercutting was reserved for women and girls and was used to judge their marriagability. Papercuts are used for religious and decorative purposes and have special significance at festivals. Artists use a knife or scissors to carve the images, use folk motifs (with local and national features), and often use bright red paper (Baker, 2007; [People’s Daily](#), 2007; [Thinkquest](#), 1998; [Wikipedia](#), 2007).

Single artifact analysis.

Examine the Chinese papercut below. Look carefully at the artifact and notice the details of the art form. Sort your observations into the things you know and the things you would like to know. Then organize your observations in a KWL chart as shown.



Note: Author’s photo, artist unknown.

Know	Want to Know	Learned
red and white	What is it for? Are pandas	

panda	common in China? Do	
bamboo	pandas eat bamboo? Do	
cut rather than torn	pandas represent	
red paper	something in China?	
rectangular frame	Does bamboo represent	
	something in China? How	
	is it made? What material	
	is used? What is the	
	significance of red? Are	
	papercuts always red?	
	Can it be any shape?	
	What makes them? Is this	
	a traditional or	
	contemporary art form?	
	Where does the idea for	
	paper cutting come from?	

Generalizing from a sample of artifacts.

Although we learn a great deal from examining individual artifacts, studying multiple examples allows us to generalize about a collection of artifacts. Generalizations are pattern statements. They tie together related facts thereby providing a different level of understanding. Generalizations about culture help us understand cultural identity and world view. Forming generalizations guides students in developing connective reasoning, an important cognitive skill for global understanding. By examining a variety of papercuts, students begin to further discover the unique aspects of this art along with generalizations that apply across the art form.



Note: Author's photos, artists unknown

Assume the role of an anthropologist for a moment and carefully examine each papercut. What do you think each one tells you about the way of life in the People's Republic of China? What makes each papercut unique? Do these papercuts seem to share anything in common? Record these educated guesses. What questions do you have about any of these papercuts? List these. Now write one statement that makes a generalization about the papercuts. This sentence needs to link all of the viewed papercuts together. What do they seem to share in common? You are looking for a pattern (avoid listings in your generalization). For example, students might suggest that the artifacts reflect a Chinese appreciation of beauty in their surroundings and nature. How can you determine the validity of this generalization?

Due to the higher level cognitive reasoning involved in forming generalizations as well as the benefits of hearing different perspectives, we suggest placing students in groups for this part of the artifact study. Shaping generalizations based upon the multiple perspectives of a group reinforces the notion that although each student brings a unique perspective to the group, their combined perspectives can lead toward a shared understanding. Although you can determine a great deal by examining artifacts and generalizing about them, more background information is always helpful for understanding culture. The "want to know" section of the KWL chart can direct students' further study.

Recognizing the fundamental purposes of artifacts within a culture – and drawing parallels to their equivalents in our own culture is important. From there, we can begin to generalize about cultural values and then compare them to our own cultural values. Continuing our artifact study, let's examine an American quilt and then compare it to Chinese papercuts.

American Folk Art: Quilts

Quilting is an American folk art. It has been present in the United States since colonial times. The earliest quilts were made by women from wealthy families, particularly planters and merchants. They demonstrated their social position through fine needlework made from expensive imported fabrics. Often they were more decorative than functional and they were signed by their creators. After the industrial revolution, textile mills were able to produce cloth more cheaply and it became more plentiful. Scraps were often saved to create quilts that were both beautiful and functional. As the folk art grew in popularity, it gained significance for a wider audience (Eanes, et al, 1988).

Single artifact analysis.

Using the earlier suggested questions for guiding an artifact study, carefully examine the quilt below. Again, note your observations and questions for further study in the chart.

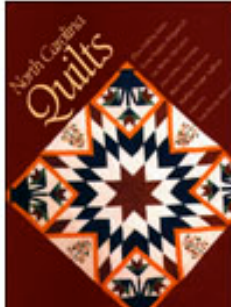


Note: From Quilter's Muse Virtual Museum (Online, <http://www.quiltersmuse.com>) by P. L Cummings, 2002, Concord, NH: Quilter's Muse Publications. Copyright 2002 by James Cummings. Reprinted with permission.

Know	Want to Know	Learned
Repeated design White background Same colors for each flower Red and blue/green design Geometric shapes	What is it for? How is it made? What material is used? Is this a traditional or contemporary art form? Does the flower represent something specific? Are the colors chosen for a reason? Is this functional or decorative?	

Generalizing from a sample of artifacts.

After examining a single artifact, it is appropriate to examine several examples and begin to generalize. As you examine the American quilts, consider the guiding questions presented earlier in the framework.



Note. From *North Carolina Quilts* (cover), by E. F. Eanes, et al, 1988, Chapel Hill, NC: University of NC Press. Reprinted with permission.



Note. From *Patchwork Lives*, by Nebraska State Historical Society 2005, Lincoln, NE: Author. Copyright 2005 by Nebraska State Historical Society. Reprinted with permission.



Now write one statement that generalizes about the quilts. As in the papercut example, this sentence needs to link the quilts together. What do they seem to have in common? Again, you are looking for a pattern. After examining these artifacts, read additional background information to assist in pattern detection. For example, students might notice that all of the quilts contain geometric figures. Symmetry, pattern and congruent shapes are an important part of the quilt designs.

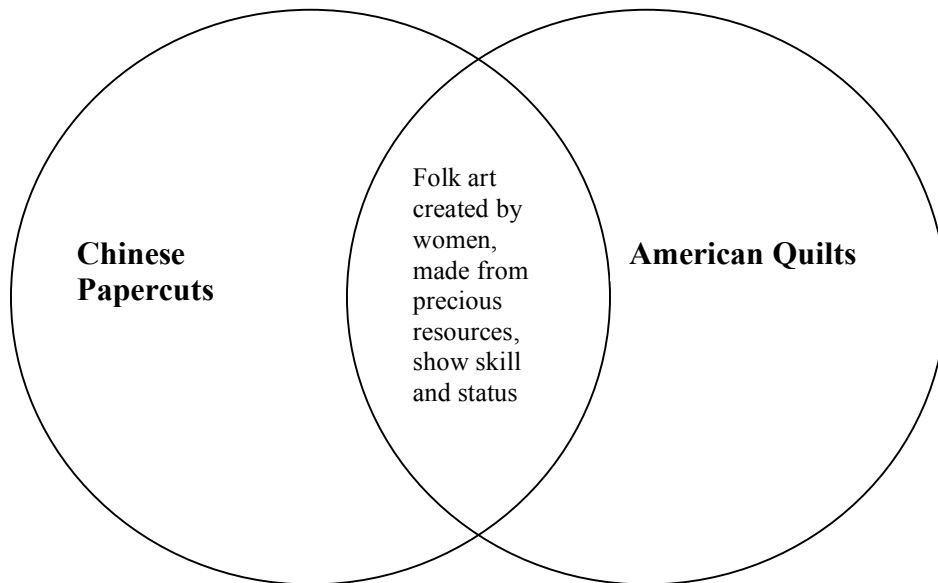
Comparing Across Cultures

The final step in using artifacts to recognize the uniqueness and unity of cultures is to make comparisons between the cultures. Two strategies assist students in this comparative study, focus questions and graphic organizers.

Using an inquiry approach, focus questions assist students in comparing artifacts from different cultures. The following focus questions might guide a comparison of quilting in the United States and papercuts in China, using folk art as a Universal of Culture. These questions are easily modified for the study of different Universals of Culture such as food, clothing or shelter. Addressing these focus questions suggests further areas of study on these art forms. This additional research begins to immerse students in sufficient information to facilitate pattern detection.

- What is the purpose of this folk art?
- Who makes this folk art?
- What resources are used in making this folk art?
- What symbols of culture do I see in this folk art?

At first glance the artifacts from China and the United States may seem quite different. When we examine them more carefully using the focus questions and research springing from those questions, we begin to realize that they are fundamentally similar. Within the context of the Universals of Culture, they are both identified as folk art. Furthermore, they were both originally used for decorative rather than functional purposes and most were made by women from prominent families. Both were made of precious materials available only to those with financial means, and the most skilled women demonstrated their talents through these arts. Both of these traditional crafts serve the same function within the Universals of Culture. The Venn diagram below depicts common attributes of these folk arts.



This process of comparing cultures using the Universals of Culture framework can be applied to both any culture and any of the universals. For example, a study of food in China and the mid-eastern United States reveals some interesting patterns. Since arable and grazing lands are at a premium in China, pork products (hogs require very little pen space) and ocean/river products (fish, eel, squid) become the meat staples. Due to limited fuel resources, the cooking of these products often involves cutting the meats into small pieces and stir frying them, a very energy efficient system. In comparison, the topography of the mid-eastern United States has resulted in hog farming over cattle grazing and a popularity of seafood due to proximity to the ocean. A traditional mid-eastern gathering often features a “pig pickin” – a whole pig slowly cooked on a grill. This is due to the availability of pork products as in China, but also to the importance of eating in a social context and in the original tradition, because of limited means to preserve food. This comparison helps students recognize patterns: that diet is influenced by available resources and cultural values. Thus, this pattern recognition builds unity while acknowledging cultural uniqueness.

Conclusion

By focusing on unity and uniqueness, students see how big ideas relate to themselves as well as the broader world. Both are equally important. Fundamentally, people are more

the same than different, yet each culture has its own unique qualities and expression of the Universals of Culture. This, in fact, is the core of pattern recognition – recognizing the big ideas that promote understanding of self and others. This perspective creates shared understanding, while recognizing the unique qualities of cultural customs, traditions, and beliefs. The Universals of Culture infuse a global dimension to local lives.

Centuries ago, Confucius noted: “By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart” (Confucius, 1999).

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